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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**COMMUNICATIONS AND
THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY PROCESS
UNDER THE MEDIA MICROSCOPE:
AIR STRIKES IN SUDAN**

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In August 1998 the United States Commander in Chief ordered military operations against terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Sudan. Interagency coordination preceded the order and continued both during and after the bombs fell. The interagency process also encompassed our government's communications strategy in the explosions' wake and subsequent interaction with domestic constituencies, international audiences, and the media. In this paper I will use the Sudanese air strike as a mini case study on the US government interagency process on a national security issue. While briefly reviewing the open-source pre-coordination process on an extremely close-hold military operation, I will focus on the government's communications strategy immediately after the strike. The paper concludes with some recommendations for a more effective interagency communications strategy to better advance US national interests.

On 20 August 1998, the President of the United States directed the execution of air strikes against a pharmaceutical plant in the Sudan. In a brief press conference called while vacationing in Martha's Vineyard, the president tied the strikes to the terrorist bombings of American embassies in Africa -- "Today we have struck back." Citing "compelling information" of terrorist planning for additional attacks, he said, "Our objective was to damage their capacity to strike at Americans and other innocent people."¹ Later that day, National Security Advisor Sandy Berger claimed justification for this action in United Nations Charter, Article 51, citing self-defense when imminently threatened.

¹ President Clinton, "President Clinton Announces Strikes," Edgartown Elementary School, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, United States Information Agency press release, 20 Aug 98, 2:00pm EDT

The interagency process leading up to the Commander in Chief's order can be pieced together from comments made by NSA Berger and from investigative reports from the New York Times² On 10 August, in response to the 7 August embassy bombings and indications of linkages to Osama bin Laden, the NSA gathered a small group of the president's closest advisors to begin planning options This group consisted of the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff the Central Intelligence Agency Director, and the Attorney General "Few national security issues in Clinton's presidency were handled with greater secrecy or by a smaller group of people"³ The group (or subsets of this group) met with the President (and probably the Vice President) on the 12th and 14th of August as additional evidence and planning information became available On the 12th the CJCS brought in information on a number of possible targets which was quickly narrowed down to the Al Shifa Pharmaceutical Plant On the 14th the President ordered the SECDEF to proceed with operational steps in preparation for the attack In accordance with Joint Doctrine Crisis Action Planning, this order would be conveyed to the regional Commander in Chief through an Alert or Planning Order

As interesting as who *was* included in this small group was who *was not* invited nor informed of the planning The NSA excluded the Armed Forces services chiefs and the Defense Intelligence Agency The service chiefs learned of the plan on the 19th, one day before execution Federal Bureau of Investigation Director, Louis Freeh, was also

² Sandy Berger, "Press Briefing by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and National Security Advisor Samuel Berger," United States Information Agency press release, White House Briefing Room, 20 Aug 98 Tim Weiner and James Risen, "Decision to Strike Factory in Sudan Based Partly on Surmise," *New York Times* 21 Sep 98, and Seymour Hersh, "Tight Circle Behind Raid," *New Yorker Magazine* 5 Oct 98

³ Weiner and Risen

bypassed because, in the view of Freeh and many of his top aides, President Clinton “questions his political loyalty”⁴

Prior to the attack, the President dispatched the JCS Vice Chairman to Pakistan so he could be with Pakistani military leaders at the time of the attack.⁵ No one wanted them to mistake the barrage of incoming missiles for an Indian nuclear attack. Finally, early on the morning of the 20th, the President authorized the Execute Order for a military strike against Sudan. As Commander in Chief, he took this action without coordination with the Legislative branch pursuant to his (and most all past presidents) interpretation of Article II, Section II of the Constitution. Prior to the actual launch of the missiles, however, he did notify the majority leadership of the House and Senate of the pending action. No other domestic or international leaders were briefed prior to the air strikes.

In short, the interagency coordination process leading up to the military strike in Sudan was extremely limited due to the utmost concern for secrecy and the President’s view that he had the legal and ethical legitimacy to prosecute the attack. In this day of media leaks, even Sandy Berger was amazed that secrecy was maintained. Later accusations, however, would fault the process for not including a broad enough range of experts to ensure the best intelligence was available or the best decision was made.

The cruise missiles were thus launched and the pharmaceutical factory lay in ruins -- a communications strategy was now needed. The President’s advisors knew the American public, Congress, world leaders, international bodies, and foreign populations

⁴ Weiner and Risen. One can only conjecture over the dynamics of this Model III decision, or of its ramifications for future bureaucratic cooperation in sensitive governmental planning of the FBI, the JCS, or the Defense Intelligence Agency. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Harvard University: Harper Collins Publishers, 1971).

⁵ *New York Times*, 25 Aug 98

were awaiting answers. An interagency communications-focused group was called together composed of individuals from the Department of State, Department of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the National Security Council, and the United States Information Agency. While the "official" strategy they devised remains classified, details may be inferred based on analysis of actual events.

After the President's brief statement at Martha's Vineyard, he returned to the Oval Office where he addressed the public later on the 20th. Over the next few days, a series of briefings, press releases, and statements followed by senior department officials. Special briefings were held for Middle East ambassadors, members of Congress, and foreign reporters. The Secretary of State went on the talk shows and was interviewed by the Voice of America. The officials and audiences varied, but the message was the same: We will not give much information because this fight against terrorism is a different type of conflict calling for different levels of disclosure. It is an on-going war. We acted in self defense. The attack was justified. We have compelling physical evidence.

On the 23rd and 24th, the media raised many questions and brought to light contradictions in the US government's claims.⁶ On August 24th in the United Nations assembly, Kuwait proposed an international investigation be sent to Sudan. Peter Burleigh, the US deputy representative to the UN, said after the meeting,

We have credible information that fully justifies the strike. There's no doubt about the evidence the US government has as we've heard from President Clinton. There is no question. Putting together a technical team to confirm something that we already know based on our own information doesn't seem to have any point to us.⁷

⁶ Information included foreign contractors who had been inside the plant, evidence that the plant did manufacture legitimate pharmaceuticals, conflicting information on how heavily the plant was guarded, etc.

⁷ Peter Burleigh, "United Nations Report," USIA transcript, 24 Aug 98.

This circular logic didn't convince anyone. After another day to contemplate the strategy, government spokesmen repeated the rather unconvincing message. Thomas Pickering, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, said on the 25th, "I don't believe that an international investigative committee needs to have an additional role. The evidence, in our view, is clear and persuasive."⁸ The communications strategy was seemingly an information vacuum. On the 26th, government officials felt forced to reveal that the "compelling, physical evidence" was a soil sample.

A week after the attack, the story generally fell off the front page of domestic newspapers, but many questions remained. The communications campaign was seemingly over even though the initial strategy had not been very successful and new information continued to be brought up.⁹ Meanwhile, the debate continued in nations' capitals and in the domestic and international media. Questions went largely unanswered by the US government.

Data does not exist to quantitatively determine how well the communications strategy conveyed the government's case for the military operation. But inferences can be made by a review of media coverage. Polls conducted immediately after the attacks and found nearly 70% of Americans approved of the strikes.¹⁰ However, later in

⁸ Thomas Pickering, "Pickering on US Sudan, Afghanistan Strikes," United States Information Agency transcript, Foreign Press Center, Washington DC, 25 Aug 98.

⁹ USIA established a web page to track every communication of the USG to the press entitled, "Special Report: US Strikes in Afghanistan and Sudan." USIA did not post any official USG communication after August 26th even though the site was last updated on 1 October. It can be found at www.usia.gov/topical/pol/terror/strikes.htm. The USIA's Foreign Media Commentary web page that tracks editorials in foreign media has nothing more current than 1 Sep on the Sudan air strikes. It can be found at www.usia.gov.

¹⁰ Report prepared by Alvin Richman, USIA Office of Research and Media Reaction, "Report: Majority of Americans Support Strikes Against Terrorist Sites," 25 Aug 98. The question combined both operations against Afghanistan and the Sudan.

September and October after numerous questions had been raised and no answers forthcoming, even some officials within the interagency itself questioned the government's case "As an American citizen, I am not convinced of the evidence," said one administration official ¹¹

Internationally, the air strikes received favorable government reactions from a small handful of countries like France, Turkey, and Uganda However, the operation definitely did not fair well in the Muslim world

America's cruise missile attack against the medicine factory in Sudan was taken as an attack on Islam itself - another insult from the forever-condescending West Washington's refusal to allow an international investigation of the disputed claim that the factory also made nerve gas reinforces the image of a self-righteous nation that places itself above all others ¹²

The Arab League denounced the strikes and gave strong backing to Sudan Popular opinion among Muslims was "very negative" despite Sudan's low standing in the Arab world Even the exiled Sudanese opposition felt like Sudan now had "the upper hand" ¹³

To summarize, this paper has posited that the US government failed to convince at least an important portion of its targeted audience of the legality and morality of their attack, despite a concerted effort by an interagency public information team Below are three recommendations to improve the interagency communications strategy process

¹¹ Weiner and Risen "[N]ow some State Department and CIA officials argue that the government cannot justify its actions "

Some in State Depart and CIA argue that the government cannot justify its actions

¹² James Carroll, "Air Strikes Don't Work," Boston Globe (6 Oct 98) A15

¹³ Madoud Bushehr , Al Fedjit newspaper, quoted in "United Nations Report," USIA transcript, 24 Aug 98

Institutionalize an interagency contingency crisis communications team.

Presidential Decision Directive 56 is the Clinton Administration's policy on managing complex contingency operations. It was written mainly to apply to peace and humanitarian operations, and expressly *does not* apply to counter-terrorism or armed conflict. It does include, however, philosophies relevant to an interagency team tasked with the government's communications strategy in a crisis.

While agencies of government have developed independent capacities to respond to complex emergencies, agencies should operate in a synchronized manner through effective interagency management. Integrated planning and effective management early on can create unity of effort within an operation that is essential for success of the mission. Dedicated mechanisms and integrated planning processes are needed.¹⁴

In response to PDD-56, an interagency International Public Information sub-group was formed to make recommendations for improvement of information strategies during crisis operations.¹⁵

An IPI team of sorts was formed immediately after the air strikes against Sudan, however, in the words of an involved official, "We didn't do a good job. Too little, too late."¹⁶ Their focus, unfortunately, is only on a narrow market – foreign publics. My recommendation is to continue efforts to develop and institutionalize an interagency group of communications professionals, trained in developing and managing our government's strategy during crises, *including* military operations, and with a broader scope encompassing not only foreign publics, but also foreign governments, international organizations, and domestic audiences. In the dynamic information age, the goal should

¹⁴ White Paper on *The Clinton Administration's Policy on Managing Complex Contingency Operations*, Presidential Decision Directive -- 56, May 1997, p 2 and 3

¹⁵ Carol Doerflein, Director, United States Information Agency, Office of Strategic Communication, Memo, "IPI Paper on Assessing Foreign Public Opinion," 11 Mar 98

be essential, coherent coordination within the US government and effective external communications “guided by coherence, capability, discipline, and agility characterized by openness and permeability”¹⁷

Adopt proactive, “offensive” strategies during crisis or contingency operations.

The first question to be asked is does the United States government *need* to care what international leaders, organizations, and populations think about its actions? Does it need to justify its actions? The answer is clearly yes. Increasingly the United States depends on and benefits from international law in raising worldwide standards of conduct, coalition efforts during conflict, mutually beneficial economic agreements, and the blood-saving value of its “soft” power. Leading today is more difficult than in Cold War times when nations may have followed out of fear of not being on the US side. It is not an “either, or” situation anymore. The US relies on its moral authority in large extent for its global leadership and persuasive appeal.

If it is important for the US to effectively advocate its position, then poor communications during crises can impede our international leadership. In the Sudan situation, the strategy was seemingly to limit communication and was reactive, rather than proactive, in nature. An ad hoc group, formed late in the game, implementing a defensive strategy diminished the government’s opportunities for effectively communicating its position. An example of an opportunity lost was the International Non-aligned Conference, held just 10 days after the air strikes, with 50 heads of states

¹⁶ Phone interview, 16 Nov 98. The official did not want to be identified.

¹⁷ Center for Strategic & International Studies, *Reinventing Diplomacy in the Information Age* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 1998) p. 3

and 100 nations represented. A proactive strategy could have included an official presentation at this conference of US justification and reasoning for our attack. US government officials apparently did not see this opportunity and the organization passed a resolution condemning the attack. Communications strategies need to be targeted to specific audiences and be aggressive to be heard over all the other international actors.

Need a “nation focused” communications strategy, rather than bureaucracy focused.

In a contingency or crisis situation, the nation’s highest order interests must predominate over individual or organizational concerns. When numerous statements declaring “compelling evidence” for the attack could no longer be heard over international condemnation, an organizational battle ensued between those wanting to release more information and the intelligence community determined to follow standard classification procedures. The result was a stalemate due to “competing forces within the government.”¹⁸ Similarly, many voices had called for an international investigation, some suggested it be led by former President Carter. Could our secret evidence not have been shared with Jimmy Carter and Kofi Annan, who could have then addressed the United Nations? Model II organizational interests triumphed over national interests. Finally, nearly 30 days after the strikes, the government did make some of that secret evidence public. By this time, unfortunately, no one was listening. The battle was already over and the US government had lost the perceptions war.

¹⁸ Phone interview, 16 Nov 98. The official did not want to be identified.

In the end, one is left with only two possible conclusions given this Sudan case study. One judgment would be that the Al Shifa Pharmaceutical Plant was not a justifiable target and was actually an intelligence failure. If the attack was made in error, then the best strategic communications plan in the world could not "save" it.¹⁹ The other judgment would be that our bombs destroyed a target instrumental in chemical weapons production, but the US government was improperly discredited due to an ineffective communications strategy. The strategic cost of this failure quickly became clear. In November, as the United States and our coalition partners once again contemplated military action against Saddam Hussein, the Sudan communications disaster was cited as "complicating planning" during interagency coordination on possible strikes. A think tank military expert put it appropriately, "One of the key issues here is not simply what you destroy but the battle for perceptions after you do it."²⁰ The interagency must be adequately armed and sufficiently motivated for this battle for perceptions. An effective, coherent strategic communications plan is as critical as the operations plan for national security strategy.

¹⁹ Senior administration officials have conceded that they made inaccurate statements about the plant. Among other things, they claimed no actual pharmaceuticals were produced at the plant and made embarrassing statements like "we checked their Internet page" and it didn't seem like they were a legitimate company. "We were not accurate," a senior administration official said. "That was a mistake." Weiner and Risen.

²⁰ Unnamed source at the Center for Strategic & International Studies as quoted in the Washington Post.